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ABSTRACT

To discover what college courses of study were most beneficial to established television and radio journalists, a survey was conducted of the persons in charge of 434 television stations and 362 radio stations. The study, similar to previous studies, asked whether the journalists had attended college and where, which of their college courses they found most beneficial to their current positions, and what courses they wished they had taken more of. Results showed that the respondents believed that writing courses were the most useful in their careers, followed by various journalism courses (field reporting, editing, mass media and society, etc.), social studies, speech, business, and law courses. Many respondents noted that they would have taken more management and other business courses and social studies courses, but would not have taken more journalism courses, remarking that they had taken a sufficient number. The results also suggest that journalism majors pay more attention to fundamental journalism courses, reading, writing, and reporting, and pay less attention to learning technical skills, as those types of skills can be learned on the job. Footnotes and three tables are included. (JC)

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NEWS DIRECTORS LOOK BACK AT THEIR EDUCATION

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As a guide to curriculum planning, broadcast journalism educators have often asked professionals what needs to be taught. News directors have patiently cooperated with mail surveys, often repeating themselves on old familiar questions. On the apparent assumption that findings more than two or three years old must surely be out of date in times of great technological change, the surveys go on and on. The main result has tended toward re-invention of the wheel.

The primary findings from the surveys have changed little since the CP-16 days of 1971, when Northwestern University faculty found that the skill news directors wanted most in entry-level newspeople was the ability to write news. The ability to report on the air from the scene was rated next in importance. High value was also ascribed to knowledge of current events and social studies.[1] The news directors of 16 years ago wanted educated graduates who could communicate in writing and on the air.

Subsequent studies have reaffirmed writing as the most important skill. In the late 1970s, Lamoreux and Bennett learned from RTNDA news directors that they valued writing more highly than production skills.[2] Also in the late 1970s, news directors and other broadcast journalists in Ohio told Fisher that the most "definitely necessary" training was in writing, on-air and other reporting and history/current events.[3] In 1980 and again in 1986, Hudson found radio and TV news employers recommending reporting and writing for top priority in broadcast journalism

education, with video equipment skills ranked next by TV news employers in the 1986 survey. A strong liberal arts foundation was rated highly valuable in both surveys.[4]

Writing, the ability to communicate well and the ability to think clearly were rated the most important skills for on-air people working for TV and radio news directors interviewed for RTNDA in 1984 by Magid Associates. The same news directors told Magid that recent graduates they had hired were not very good at writing and only a little better at communicating on the air, though they were pretty good at thinking clearly and handling broadcast equipment.[5] Follow up research co-sponsored by RTNDA is being conducted in 1987 by the Roper Organization.

Broadcast journalism is the major that news directors have most often said they prefer in college graduates. Three-fourths of the TV news directors surveyed by Stone and Hayes in 1973 said broadcast journalism was their first choice.[6] Hudson also found broadcast journalism strongly preferred in his 1986 survey.[7]

What did the news directors themselves major in? Those surveyed by Stone in 1972 had majored in journalism or mass communciation in only about 40 percent of the cases,[8] about the same as for U.S. journalists surveyed across media in 1971 in a study updated by Weaver and Wilhoit in 1983, when communication majors accounted for 55 percent of the journalists surveyed.[9]

The present study ascertains news directors' majors, their schools, the courses they believe have helped them most and the courses they would now take that they did not take then. Unlike most other surveys, this one asks news directors what has worked best, not for others, but for themselves.

METHOD

Questionnaires were mailed in summer of 1986 to news directors at the population of approximately 800 non-satellite commercial TV stations and a systematic random sample of 850 commercial radio stations with working addresses in the 1986 Broadcasting Yearbook. A second mailing went to non-respondents six weeks later. Questionnaires were marked and returned by persons in charge of news at 434 (54.2%) of the TV and 362 (42.6%) of the radio stations.

RESULTS

They have been to college. The great majority of news directors are college graduates. Degrees were held by 76.1 percent of the TV and 68.6 percent of the radio respondents last year. The educational level was up from 1972, when 56.2 percent of the TV and 36.5 percent of the radio news directors were college graduates. Most others in 1986 had some college in their backgrounds. Only 3.3 percent of the TV news directors and 9.7 percent of the radio news directors had never been to college.

Many, many colleges. There's no small handful of colleges producing most of the nation's news directors. A total of 215 colleges and universities were listed by 355 TV news directors, and two-thirds (150) of the institutions were listed by only one respondent. The 184 radio news directors who told their colleges listed 196 schools, 94 of which were named by only one respondent.

Universities producing the greatest number of TV news directors in the 1986 survey were Missouri, 11, and Michigan

State, 10. Minnesota and Ohio University had 8 each; Indiana, Ohio State and Southern Illinois, 7 each; Wisconsin, 6; and American, Iowa, Iowa State, Kentucky, Louisiana State and Northwestern, 5 each. Seven schools each claimed 4 of the TV respondents; 13 claimed 3 each, and 31 had 2 each.

Boston University was named by five radio news directors, and no other school had that many. Eight schools were listed by three or four radio respondents, and 36 by two each.

Majors. More than a fourth of the news directors, both in television and radio, had majored in journalism. Radio-TV, telecommunication and other mass media and communication majors were listed by an additional third of the news directors. As Table 1 shows, the combination of journalism, radio-TV and communication majors accounted for 61.6 percent of the total in television and 60.6 percent in radio. That compares to about 40 percent of the news directors, both in radio and television, responding in 1972.[10] Majors in the communication field were claimed by 54.7 percent of the U.S. journalists surveyed by Weaver and Wilhoit in 1982-83, as against 41.7 percent in a comparable 1971 study.[11]

Social studies majors were listed by one of every 10 news directors in 1986. Speech, English and business were the majors of several respondents.

Most valuable courses. Writing courses were the ones the news directors said had helped them most. As Table 2 details, about a third of the TV news directors and well over a third of the radio news directors named a writing course when asked: "What single college course has helped you most?" Though

TABLE 1: College Majors of News Directors

	TV	Radio
Journalism	29.3%	28.5%
Radio-TV	17.1	9.3
Communication	15.2	22.8
Social Studies	14.2	10.3
Speech	6.0	7.3
English	8.1	6.0
Business	3.3	6.6
Other	6.8	9.2
	100.0%	100.0%
N of cases	369	302

TABLE 2: Categories of News Director Responses to: "What single college course has helped you most?"

Television:	All TV NDs	Size of Full-time News Staff			
		0-10	11-20	21-35	36+
Journ/RT Writing	21.0%	21.6%	20.9%	14.5%	28.1%
Non-J/RT Writing	11.5	9.5	14.0	14.5	7.0
Other Journalism	13.9	20.3	16.2	8.6	8.8
Other Radio-TV	9.4	13.5	8.1	5.8	10.5
Social Studies	12.9	6.8	11.6	18.8	15.8
Speech	5.2	8.1	7.0	2.9	1.8
Business	9.1	6.8	4.7	15.9	10.5
Law	5.6	8.1	4.7	4.3	5.3
Other	11.2	5.4	12.8	14.5	12.3
	99.8%	100.1%	100.0%	99.8%	100.1%
N of cases	286	74	86	69	57

Radio:	All Radio NDs	Full-time News Staff		
		0-1	2	3+
Journ/RT Writing	27.5%	30.6%	22.9%	22.4%
Non-J/RT Writing	11.9	12.9	8.3	12.2
Other Journalism	13.5%	14.3	18.7	6.1
Other Radio-TV	9.0	8.2	10.4	10.2
Social Studies	10.2	10.9	8.3	10.2
Speech	10.2	8.8	16.7	8.2
Business	2.9	1.4	4.2	6.1
Law	5.3	2.7	2.1	16.3
Other	9.4	10.2	8.3	8.2
	99.9%	100.0%	99.9%	99.9%
N of cases	244	147	48	49

journalism and radio-TV writing courses were named most often, the most helpful course for one of every nine news directors was a writing course taken in another department, usually English.

Writing was rated number one for news directors in large and small operations alike. The preferred course was most likely to be in journalism or broadcast writing when the news director headed a large TV operation (36 or more full-time staff) or a very small radio operation (no more than one full-timer).

Other journalism courses (field reporting, editing, mass media and society, etc.) were named next most often as the most helpful, with other broadcast courses such as production and management just behind.

Social studies courses (history, political science, sociology, etc.) were listed as most helpful by one of every eight TV and one of every 10 radio news directors.

Speech courses (rhetoric, debate, theatre, oral interpretation, etc.) were also named by one of every 10 radio respondents, but by only one of 20 TV respondents.

Business-related courses (management, administration, advertising, economics, etc.) were named the most helpful by a fair number of TV news directors, particularly those heading larger operations, but by few radio news directors. Apparently only a few had taken business courses.

Law courses, usually taught in journalism or telecommunication schools or departments but sometimes in law or business schools, were listed as most valuable by several respondents, most notably by heads of larger radio news departments.

"If doing it over again, what course or courses would you take that you did not take then?"

Management and other business courses were named by the majority of TV news directors in all but the smallest operations. Table 3 shows that, even in those small TV newsrooms with 10 or fewer full-time newspeople, nearly half of the news directors said they would take business courses if going to college again. This is consistent with the finding that the majority of TV news directors in all but the smallest operations now spend more of their time on management than on news.[12]

Social studies was second among the kinds of courses the TV news directors would take in greater numbers if reprising their college careers.

Few TV news directors would take courses in journalism, writing or radio-TV if going back again. They rate those courses among the most helpful they took, but believe they had enough. Law and a variety of other courses made the wish list in small numbers.

If radio news directors were going back to school, they would be spread fairly evenly across courses in business, social studies and communication (writing, other journalism and radio-TV). Those in larger operations (3 or more full-time staff) would be the most likely to take business or additional social studies courses.

TABLE 3: Categories of News Director Responses to: "If doing it over again, what course or courses would you take that you did not take then?"

Television:	All TV NDs	Size of Full-time News Staff			
		0-10	11-20	21-35	36+
Business	57.7%	44.8%	62.0%	59.1%	64.2%
Social Studies	26.2	19.0	25.4	31.8	28.3
Journalism	10.9	20.7	9.9	7.6	5.7
Writing	8.5	13.8	11.3	6.1	1.9
Radio-TV	5.2	10.3	4.2	3.0	3.8
Law	10.9	15.5	8.5	9.1	11.3
Other	28.6	34.5	21.1	30.3	30.2
	*148.0%	158.6%	142.4%	147.0%	145.4%
	248	58	71	66	53

Radio:	All Radio NDs	Full-time News Staff		
		0-1	2	3+
Business	29.5%	28.2%	22.0%	40.5%
Social Studies	29.0	28.2	17.1	42.9
Journalism	18.1	16.4	22.0	19.0
Writing	11.4	11.8	9.8	11.9
Radio-TV	13.0	12.7	12.2	14.3
Law	6.2	5.5	2.4	11.9
Other	26.4	23.6	36.6	23.8
	133.6%	126.4%	122.1%	164.3%
N of cases	193	110	41	42

*Multiple responses accepted.

DISCUSSION

What do the results say for the teachers, curriculum planners and AEJMC divisions which are reminded at every turn that they must always be changing, keeping abreast of the new technology, always relevant and on the cutting edge?

The more times change, the more the fundamentals stay the same. Effective instructional programs are directing their primary efforts to much the same topics today as 25 years ago. In broadcast news, the old fashioned and also up to date three Rs are reading (social studies and other liberal arts), 'riting and reporting (on-air included).

Those three Rs are fundamentals that need to be learned in school. A broad general education cannot be left to later, when the journalist will be preoccupied with honing professional skills. Good writing, along with the clear thinking it fosters, usually develops from a long process of individual practice and critique. News directors and other supervisors on the job can help writers add professional polish, but expect the basic writing skills to have been learned in school. The third R -- reporting -- can be learned on the job, but a journalism major without substantial training in reporting has a mislabeled major.

In a broadcast journalism major, we should also be able to assume that aural and visual sensitivities are developed. Realistic instruction in broadcast reporting and news production requires that students tell stories using audio and video tape and live feeds. In many programs, they'll use equipment which is not necessarily state of the art.

The new, usually improved equipment which comes out continually can be learned on the job. It's easier to teach technical skills to an educated person than to educate a technician.

Broadcast journalism programs do need to keep up to date with technology, but should never forget that one Ed Bliss is worth a thousand Max Headrooms.

The greatest change calling for curricular attention in recent years has been the changing role of news in broadcasting. As has been the case with newspapers from the beginning, news in radio and television is now viewed as a commodity that sells. Our students need to understand that TV newsrooms have become profit centers. Except in small operations, news directors spend more time on managerial than journalistic activities. Not surprisingly, if going back to college, they would give top priority to courses in management and business.

Does this mean that business courses should be required? Probably not. It's questionable that such outside professional courses should be forced on students who are training for careers in reporting or production and want no part of management. But for those who think they might ever be supervisors, such courses as personnel management are well advised. Even students who never plan to manage should leave school with an understanding of how news operations work as part of the broadcast industry the students plan to enter. They should get this in broadcast journalism courses. As specialization becomes more prevalent, educated awareness of the bigger picture is surprisingly easy to miss on the job.

Finally, let's look to the future. Twenty years and three revolutionary new technologies from now, AEJMC will direct the Radio-TV Journalism Division to demonstrate that it is on the curricular cutting edge. New surveys will be conducted. They will reveal that what broadcast journalism graduates need most are liberal arts, writing and on-air reporting skills. A good wheel re-invents well.

FOOTNOTES

1 "Basic Skills Sought in Broadcast News," Broadcasting, March 13, 1972, p. 47.

2 Stephen Lamoreux and James Bennett, "How RTNDA Members View Importance of Writing," Journalism Quarterly 57:666-670 (Winter 1980).

3 Harold A. Fisher, "Broadcast Journalists' Perceptions of Appropriate Career Preparation," Journalism Quarterly 55:140-144 (Spring 1978).

4 Jerry C. Hudson, "Radio TV News Staff Employers Prefer Broadcasting Degree, Strong Liberal Arts Foundation," Journalism Educator 36:27-28,30 (July 1981); Jerry C. Hudson, "Broadcasters Want Experience, Skills and Liberal Arts," Journalism Educator 41:36-38 (Winter 1987).

5 Frank N. Magid Associates, Inc., "Future Trends in Broadcast Journalism," unpublished report presented to the Radio-Television News Directors Association, Washington, D.C., June 1984, pp. 18-22. 38-42.

6 Vernon Stone and Deborah Hayes, "Television News Needs, Finances and Staffing Are Surveyed," RTNDA Communicator, Sept. 1975, pp. 8-10.

7 Hudson, 1987, op. cit.

8 Vernon A. Stone, "Radio-Television News Directors and Operations," RTNDA Communicator, June 1973, pp. 5-12.

9. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 55-60.

10 Stone, 1972, op. cit.

11 Weaver and Wilhoit, op. cit.

12 Vernon A. Stone, "News Directors Profiled," RTNDA Communicator, June 1986, pp. 21-16.